

VIRGINIA'S ACADEMIC AND CAREER PLAN EMPHASIZES



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BY VIRGINIA R. JONES

To have a meaningful, fulfilling career in the 21st century workplace, students need technical and academic skills as well as the ability to think and work collaboratively with others. Career education must begin in middle school or earlier to allow students time to develop the aptitudes, skills and attitudes necessary to develop an awareness of their chosen career. Middle school is an important transition stage between elementary and high school and provides the perfect opportunity for life or career planning through the development of skills, knowledge, attitudes and awareness of careers (Kerka, 2000).

The Virginia Department of Education has undertaken positive steps to reinforce career planning through its implementation of the Academic and Career Plan (ACP). The state board of education, in its 2009 revisions to the Regulations Establishing Standards for Accrediting Public Schools in Virginia, set forth provisions for each middle and high school student to have a personalized learning plan that aligns academic and career goals with the student's course of study. Slated to begin in the 2011-2012 academic year, all schools are required to develop a personal ACP for each seventh-grade student with completion by the fall of the student's

eighth-grade year. The components of the plan should include the student's program of study for high school graduation and a postsecondary career pathway based on the student's academic and career interests. The ACP is developed using a template designed by the Virginia Department of Education incorporating guidelines established by the board of education. It encourages school-parent-student collaboration by ensuring the student, student's parent or guardian, and school official sign it. The ACP is included in the student's record, reviewed, and updated, if necessary, before the student enters the ninth and eleventh grades.

Middle School

Career Counseling

Research shows that career counseling at an earlier age helps to overcome the barriers of race, ethnicity and socioeconomics. Counseling gives students awareness of the wide range of postsecondary opportunities, from those requiring college or technical training to those that do not require any type of formalized degree. It helps students' master academic and life-career skills with an understanding of the relationships between these skills and future career success. Career counseling develops the decision-making and other skills necessary for postsecondary success. This awareness helps students reach their fullest potential to become effective lifelong learners, responsible citizens, and productive, satisfied workers in today's global economy (New Jersey School Counselor Association, 2005).

There is increased acceptance of the academic content in career and technical education (CTE) classes and the role that intentional career planning plays in student outcomes. Society, to a certain extent, has embraced the belief that academic pursuits are higher order skills, brain-based or intellectual versus career and technical skills which are considered manual or practical. There is a false dichotomy of "knowledge work" as opposed to "manual work" in most parents' perceptions, according to Michael Crawford's book *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into*

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the Value of Work. Even with the expanded understandings of Howard Gardner's theory about multiple intelligences, parents tend to undervalue the intelligence and knowledge skills embedded in today's comprehensive CTE programs.

Parental Involvement

Research shows that parental involvement in a child's education—specifically through school interactions such as open house, parent-teacher conferences and career fairs—have a positive link when parents believe their involvement matters (Flynn, 2006; Georgiou and Tourva, 2007).

Research from the Center for Prevention Research and Development, housed at the University of Illinois, supported evidence that middle school parents are not aware of recognized middle school practices such as teaming, advisory programs, integrated lessons and exploratory courses designed to aid in career planning. Significantly, the research supported data

that those students with above average parental involvement (school, homework and emotional support) achieved academic rates of 30 percent higher than students with below average parental involvement (Henderson and Mapp, 2002).

Kesici's (2008) research focused on parent views of middle school students' counseling needs and upheld that middle school students need guidance and counseling to assist them in assessing their career interests. The National Middle School Association in 2003 advocated, "Successful middle schools promote family involvement and take the initiative to develop needed home-school bonds" (p. 2). While parents desire involvement in middle school activities and career planning, they tend to disengage from these activities as their child progresses from elementary school to the middle school years (Allen and Migliore, 2005; Downs, 2001; Elkind, 1998). Although there is an expectation of parent and student disengagement due to the maturing of the

student, family engagement in the middle school process and career exploration is an important positive contributor to the adolescents' educational and career development.

Student Perceptions

At the middle school level, expectations are that children have formulated a clear goal of their academic or workforce aspirations and planned their educational futures accordingly (Arrington, 2000). Yet middle school students experience their greatest surge of physical and emotional growth since infancy; these changes manifest themselves into contradictory thoughts, actions and reactions in these adolescents—more often than not a move to fixing of values and self-identification (Perlstein, 2003). Studies (Arrington, 2000; Johnson, 2000; Phipps, 1995) show that 11 to 14 year olds understand the concepts of future goals, interests, an

awareness of work, and developing positive attitudes towards work; this indicates a fertile ground for career exploration and counseling. Conversely, Johnson (2000) found in a study of sixth-graders and ninth-graders that most had a shallow understanding of how school related to work and limited awareness of the knowledge and skills needed for work. More specifically, students had little or no awareness of the type of work that is involved in their career aspirations, indicating a definite call for career counseling at the middle school level.

A middle school poll prepared for the National Association of Secondary School Principals and Phi Delta Kappa (Markow, Liebman, and Dunbar, 2007) reported that nine out of 10 middle school students (92 percent) planned to attend college. This poll reported, however, that nearly seven out of 10 (68 percent) had no information about how to choose the appropri-

ate high school courses to prepare them for postsecondary education. Students knew what they desired in a post-high school career or educational pathway, but they did not possess the knowledge or tools to achieve their dreams. Virginia's ACP provides a roadmap for this secondary to postsecondary transition.

Particularly interesting is the strong correlation between student success and their involvement in school career fairs and guidance counseling; also important are the career and registration materials sent home.

Parent Perceptions

While parents believe that middle school students need guidance and counseling to prepare them for their future careers (Kesici, 2008), they have concerns about the counseling they receive. Two hundred and eleven respondents to a 2009 middle school survey conducted in Virginia stat-

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ed a strong belief that guidance counselors are not trained, able, nor have time to actually counsel and guide the students in the career process (Jones, 2009). Parents placed strong confidence in principals, administrators and teachers in providing guidance during the middle school years. Overall parents supported school services involvement, but felt counselors should provide more assistance and career guidance to students. The ACP provides a vehicle for parents, students and counselors to collaborate on the student's academic career pathway.

Implementing the ACP

School counselors are in a unique position as key implementers of this important career tool. The intent of the plan is to provide an avenue for exploring careers, goal setting, and involving parents and students in selecting required and elective courses to satisfy the student's career interests. Opportunities to collaborate and network with career and technical educators will provide school counselors with a better understanding of career clusters and associated pathways. The opportunity also exists for increased collaboration between middle school and high school counselors ensuring the very important transitional bridge between the eighth and ninth grades.

Students will benefit from the ACP by having a grade level by grade level outline of courses they need to take in preparation for their chosen educational and career endeavors. School counselors also bear the burden of implementing this plan and carving out time and resources to start the student planning. Persevering over the initial heavy time commitments will reap benefits for all: the school counselors will be able to counsel students based on their chosen pathway and not have to probe and question to discern the student's avocation; parents will see results and engage with school counselors; and students will graduate with coursework in their chosen academic career pathway.

The ACP is an idea whose time has arrived. CTE educators play an important part in ensuring that school counselors, parents and students understand the importance of career clusters and planning for postsecondary opportunities. The

plan is an essential element in improving parent and school connections, emphasizing the rigor and relevance of CTE courses, and providing the underpinnings for student success both in secondary and postsecondary education. ■

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